SAUL BELLOW'S *HERZOG,*
Or
THE RETURN OF THE MYTHICAL HERO

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To Ricardo, with admiration and gratitude
To Nacha and José

Saul Bellow's *HERZOG*, or THE RETURN OF THE MYTHICAL HERO

Introduction

Prolific writer Saul Bellow, 1976 Nobel Prize winner, published in 1964 his imaginative and multifaceted portrait of a 47-year-old university professor and writer, teaching evening classes in a New York college. So powerful was his novel that no sooner had *Herzog* been released than it became one of the most popular topics of analysis by critics and for Ph.D. theses.

Between 1964 and 2000, hundreds of studies approached *Herzog* to deal with subjects such as women characters, humor, fragmented social worlds, interracial relations and identity constructions in post World War II, the urban cosmos, the self, family relationships, alienation, Judaic influence on form and content, romantic elements, carnivalistic vision, spiritual quest, comic elements, exile and redemption, the quest for order, the American writer and his society, suffering, humanism, the

professor, among others. The list goes on, so rich and appealing the novel turned out to be.

In our opinion, one of the reasons for that tremendous success lies in that *Herzog* provides a unique opportunity to make the reader experience the deep, soul-searching examination of Moses Elkanah Herzog, Saul Bellow's charmer, as the development of the mythical journey of the heroes of lore.

Prolific in earlier times, stories of heroes are also found in the popular novels of today, as Joseph Campbell states in *The Power of Myth.* The prominent scholar states that we may encounter in modern stories the deeds of a person who has undertaken "to give his or her life to something bigger than himself" (151). And it is the guiding principles and particular structure of the heroic adventure, in its infinite and varied versions, what moves the spirit to follow it, and be lolled away as if by the rolling waves of the sea. The journey is open to all human beings, males and females because we all share the same realities of being born, growing and dying.

The distinct pattern of the hero's trip was masterfully described by Joseph Campbell, the famous scholar in Comparative Religions,

in his outstanding study of comparative mythology *The Hero with the Thousand Faces.* It is the purpose of this work to uncover in *Herzog* the elements of the formula which represents the rite of passage of the hero: *separation - initiation – return.* Campbell called this nuclear unit "monomyth" (30)[1], and proposed also an expansion of the structure that may unravel further advances within each of the elements of the initial formula. Our analysis of Herzog's journey will develop along the stages of Campbell's enlarged cycle, which will be duly paralleled, if applicable, when tracing our hero's soul-searching trip.

Though there are only very few works which have researched Saul Bellow's fiction within lines similar to the present study,[2] to our knowledge nothing has been recorded on the study of *Herzog* under Joseph Campbell's development of the mythical trip. This, undoubtedly, offers a new perspective from which to enjoy a good book.

Joseph Campbell found great parallels in ancient stories and sagas from every corner of the world, which make evident the constant statement of the same reality. He even asserted that the symbols of mythology are present and can be found in the most

unsuspected contexts. Since the artists of today are the counterparts of the early mythmakers, it is no wonder that we can detect mythical accounts of heroes in a nursery rhyme, in films, in paintings in a cave, or in a modern novel.

It is important to note that, much as our western world has tried to disqualify myth, it is through the understanding of its nature that man may find clues to account for his cultural standing today. Roman and Greek mythologies were at the bases of literatures, civilizations, and even religions, providing perspectives as to how to understand the deep issues that puzzle the human intellect.

The rationalistic thought of the Enlightenment restricted the value of myth, disqualifying it as "arbitrary, unfounded and even ridiculous" as Luis Cencillo states in *Mito, Semántica y Realidad* (3). Nevertheless, the limitations were later pushed back by the philosophical quests of the nineteenth century. The contributions of twentieth century thought finally helped produce new ways of understanding reality and the conditionings of the human mind, specially those that go deep into the roots of myth. Not in vain did

Karl Popper state "Science must begin with myths, and with the criticism of myths."[3]

Psychoanalysis, socio-economic Marxist historicism, phenomenology, neo-positivism, parapsychology, and cultural anthropology have all, in their own field, discovered and acknowledged the implications and efficacy of myth in man's life. The extent to which myth has affected thoughts and beliefs has even caused controversies in the field of religious interpretation, as proved by Rudolf K. Bultmann's attempt to "demythologize" the New Testament, confronting some of the most famous theologians of the time on the relationship between the New Testament and mythology. In *Kerigma and Myth,* the prestigious scholar went further to state that much of our ordinary language is based on mythology, and there are certain concepts which are fundamentally mythological, and with which we shall never be able to dispense (Part 1).

The nineteenth century most famous expert in comparative mythology, Sir James George Frazer, in his seminal work *The Golden Bough, The Roots of Religion and Folklore,* accounted for the study of myth, magic and religion, as a trip that

> will be long and laborious, but may possess something of the interest and charm of a voyage of discovery, in which we shall visit many strange foreign lands, with strange foreign peoples, and still stranger customs (5).

His influential book undoubtedly contributed to later developments not only in the work of Joseph Campbell but also in the research of the famous expert in Anthropology and Comparative Religions, Mircea Eliade. The research both scholars did on archaic societies and myth illuminated new and motivating ways to understand and value how traditional man related to the universe. They also provided clues to uncover the hidden ancient meaning symbolically contained behind myths and folk tales, the reservoirs of the basic truths that have guided the roaming of humankind on our planet.

Myth expresses man's belief that the origin and purpose of the world in which he lives are to be found beyond the sphere of the reality he knows and can experience, a reality perpetually dominated and menaced by those mysterious powers which are its source and limit. Moreover, myth is also a manifestation of man's awareness that he is not his own master, since it brings into light

his dependency not only within the visible world, but more especially on those forces which hold sway beyond the confines of the known. Finally, myth expresses man's belief that in this state of dependence he can be delivered from the forces within the visible world.

Both, Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade support the belief that archaic man and modern man have more in common than any layman would think. While our ancestors felt they were indissolubly connected with the Cosmos and the cosmic rhythms, modern man supports that he is connected with History. Having studied different archaic culture, in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* Eliade concludes that to the man of archaic societies the Cosmos had a history because it was created by gods, and because of this, it is "sacred" (Preface xiii-xiv). This history can be transmitted through myths. It can be repeated incessantly because events as they took place stand as models for ceremonies that actualize events that took place *in illo tempore*, at the beginning of time

Myths preserve and transmit the paradigms that man will imitate in any activity he undergoes. The Cosmos and society are continually regenerated through the models given to man *ab initio*.

Whatever object there exists, whatever actions man undertakes have value not because of their own reality, but because they participate in a reality that transcends them. In the same way, some non-automatic human acts acquire a meaning which is not connected to its physical datum but to a particular primeval act—performed by gods, ancestors or heroes in *illo tempore*—which then becomes the prototype for all subsequent acts.

Drawing his conclusions from studies on archaic cultures and comparative religions, Eliade identified the structure of this common archaic ontology, and provided examples to help us understand how and why certain things became real to archaic man. His taxonomy indicates three different categories of facts from which to approach archaic mentality.

In the first place there are those facts which show that reality is a function of the imitation of a celestial archetype. Then there are those which show how reality is conferred to a place through participation in the "symbolism of the Center", be they cities, temples, houses, which become real because they are assimilated to the "center of the world." Finally, rituals and noteworthy profane gestures which attain the meaning attributed to them, and

materialize that meaning just because they intentionally repeat such one act performed *ad initio* by gods, heroes, or ancestors (*TMER* 5).

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell overtly agrees with Mircea Eliade in that the most important function of mythology and rite is to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. He even goes further on to state that the high incidence of neuroticism among modern men follows from the decline of such effective spiritual aid. As a matter of fact, Campbell states that rather than follow the normal course of passage into adulthood, the emphasis is the reverse: the goal for man is not to grow old, but to remain young, not to mature, but to cling to Mother. It is in these cases that modern man very often finds in psychoanalysis the substitute for the witch doctor to release himself of the situation, since it is through dreams that he will find the symbols for the initiation which rite or myth no longer provide.

Scientists like Sigmund Freud and C. D. Jung also devoted much of their writings to the passages and difficulties of the human cycle. While Freud concentrated on the first portion, Jung stressed the

crises of the second half, when man, in order to advance, must submit to descend and disappear, at last into the night womb of the grave. It is death that challenges him now, not life, since what really worries him is the conviction that this life is a dream ending in a tomb, and that no matter how stimulating and appealing his life may have seem, it is only a series of changes affecting all individuals in every place and every time.

Particularly relevant to the work of Joseph Campbell were the important findings by Carl Jung, particularly those on the archetypes and the collective unconscious. Jung worked on three major themes to try to explain the structure of the mind. To him, the core characteristics of the mind are the *ego*—the conscious, individualistic mind and the center of consciousness; the *personal unconscious*, formed of socially unacceptable mental content that was once conscious but has been forced out of mental awareness by the defenses; and the *collective unconscious*—a communal, species memory representing the accumulated experiences of mankind. It is a storehouse of symbols and themes that show up in all cultures, which account for representations of the same concepts, experiences and dreams. The collective unconscious

represents a latent predisposition to apprehend the world in particular ways.

Jung states that the primary structure of the collective unconscious is built on archetypes, which are inherited predispositions to respond to certain aspects of the world. Just as the ear and eye have evolved to be maximally sensitive to certain stimuli, man has evolved psychologically to be maximally sensitive to certain categories of experience. Archetypes do not have content, only form. They are not unconscious ideas, rather predispositions to perceive the world. The list of archetypes is long, but it would certainly include birth, death, mothers, fathers, heroes, demons, wise men, heroes, etc.

I. The Hero

A. Characteristics of the Hero

From different mythologies, Campbell provides a myriad of stories from which he characterizes the hero as the man or woman who has been able to overcome personal and local historical limitations to reach the generally valid, normally human forms. The visions that the hero produces, his ideas and inspirations come from fresh from the primary springs of human life and thought. They are expressive not of the present society and psyche, but of the inextinguishable source from which society is reborn. The hero dies as a modern man to experience a rebirth as a universal man. As such, he has to purse a second task: return to his society transformed, and teach the lesson he has learned. Whoever decides to follow the call to adventure will finally reach the core of his own self, and though the path will prove dangerous and lonely, assistance will appear to make the trip endurable and successful.

Campbell highlights the characteristics of the hero by contrasting his virtues with the vices of the tyrant, embodied in the

legendary king Midas. The selfish impulse of the Cretan monarch of serving himself rather than yield to his role of leader of the community turns him into a tyrant. As such, he becomes a monster who brings shame and discredit unto his subjects. The tyrant's surrender to the selfish demands of his ego affects not only himself but also the world, even in the face of an apparently successful state of affairs. What is more, the environment—a reflection of his boundless appetite—may try to fight the tyrant, even though his intentions be gentle.

In opposition to the tyrant, a giant of spiteful conduct and self-achieved independence, stands the hero, the man of self-achieved submission. According to the renowned historian Arnold Toynbee, the hero may bring solution to the disharmony or rupture a society may experience. This, he supports, will not be solved by re-enacting the past, by enacting any project that guarantees the promotion of an ideal future, or by trying to work together the deteriorating elements affecting the present time. Only birth can conquer death. The survival of a society rests on the birth of something new to conquer the unrelenting recurrences of death.[4]

Toynbee supports that the new and living thing that will face the existing evil in a society may come from outside the ailing community, like Theseus came to the aid of the suffering Cretans. Or the fresh, new element may rise from inside the very walls of the social body. To do this, Professor Toynbee maintains, there has to be a "transfiguration" and a "detachment" that accounts for the crisis by which it is possible to reach the spiritual dimension that makes possible the continuation of the work of creation. This first stage, detachment of withdrawal, can be understood as a sweeping relocation of emphasis from the external to the internal world, from desperation to the peace of the realm within. It is psychoanalysis, precisely, who tells men that they carry this realm forever, and that it can be reached when man enters sleep. This is the unconscious, the magic land where man keeps all the fears and the helpers of our early years. There it is possible to uncover the potential man never managed to bring into adulthood; all the forgotten things he has ever experienced, and which are piled up in hidden corners of the mind, waiting to be brought to the light of day to make him expand his powers and help produce a vivid renewal of life.

Whoever can produce the renewal of potentialities by bringing to conscious attention things that may have been forgotten not only by an individual man, but by an entire generation or even civilization, would undoubtedly turn into a modern culture hero of world renown. To do this, the hero must first withdraw from the world, where the secondary effects are found, to zones of the psyche where the difficulty really lies. There, he will see difficulties clearly, erase them in the particular case, and break through to the direct experience and assimilation of the "archetypal images," following Jung, or achieving the "discrimination" stage, in the Hindu and Buddhist philosophy.

In *Psychology and Religion,* Jung states that the archetypal images are "forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as autochthonous, individual products of unconscious origins."[5] The archetypes man will discover and assimilate are specifically those that have inspired the basic images of ritual and mythology throughout human history. Campbell clearly manifests there are the differences between these images, and the symbolic figures that, appearing in man's dreams, though personally

modified, may torment the individual. In this line, dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream, being both, myth and dream, symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche. But, while in the dream the forms are modified by the particular troubles of the dreamer, in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind.

The hero of Campbell's mythological adventure is a person of outstanding characteristics; he may be honored or disdained by his society. He, or the world in which he lives, suffers form a symbolical deficiency, which may be the result of a vision of earth on the point of falling into ruin. The triumph of the hero achieves the characteristics of a macrocosmic triumph, valid for humankind. Popular tales represent the heroic action as physical, but it may also be moral, as some religions show.

With surprising regularity, the story of a hero taking a trip is present in all latitudes, and everywhere the story shows that the difficult and dangerous journey was not a matter of unearthing but of re-detecting, not of achieving, but of gaining back. Anything the hero has sought and won is discovered to have been within him all the time. The hero, then, proves to be "the king's son" (*THWTF,*

39), who has come to know who he is and how powerful he is. As "God's son" (39), he is a symbol of the divine image hidden in us all, waiting to be known and to be given life to.

In psychological terms, the hero represents what Freud calls *ego*, that part of personality that we consider different from the rest of the human beings. The hero archetype represents the ego's quest for identity and completeness. Within his own self, the hero will find almost all the rest of the archetypes that he will encounter in his journey: guides, teachers, villains and friends, who will have to be integrated so as to make of all these separate parts one composite picture of a whole balanced human entity.

At first, the hero is all ego, but he manages to transcend its boundaries through the journey he undertakes. From the point of view of the dramatic development of the story, the hero makes the audience identify with him, to see the story through his eyes. He can do it because he has universal qualities, emotions and motivations that everyone has experienced at one time or another: lust, love, revenge, despair, or pride. He does not present one characteristic, but a composite picture—the more conflicting, the

better because it will make the reader aware that he is more a real person than just a type.

Heroes overcome obstacles and achieve goals but they also gain new knowledge and wisdom, which is the heart of many stories. And they learn by doing. Acting or doing is one of the characteristics of the hero, and this performance of the action is that which requires taking the most risk or responsibility. Even though he is commonly considered as strong or brave, the genuine characteristic of the hero is sacrifice, that is, the will to give up something of great value, even his life, for the achievement of an ideal.

B. Herzog as Hero

If a story may reveal something of its nature from the writer's choice of title, then from the very name "Herzog," readers are hinted a clue as to the nature of the character around whom the story will develop. "Herzog," just as "Moses," and "Elkanah," are names that may provide some signs to the understanding of our hero's personality and relationship to people.

Herzog, who presented his father as a sacred being, a king, saw himself as a prince,[6] a man interested in society, duty and power, a patriarch and giver of life (*Herzog,* 202), and as such, Herzog believed that a man should be concerned with the matters of society, of civility, of politics (94). He should be the meeting point of heaven and earth, ethics and worldly rule. Yet, in the comic light he many times saw himself, he was a "broken-down monarch" (39), the son of a princely immigrant, some of whose physical traits did not reveal he was an intellectual: his hands were the hands of a man more devoted to manual work than to the work of the spirit (92).

Moses, a prophetic-like name of biblical origin, suggests a law-giver, a person deeply committed to moral law. Because of his ascendants, Herzog was meant to be a family founder, a source and creator of life, a mediator between the past and the future (202). *Elkanah*, "God created,"[7] or he whom god "God possesses," alludes to the spiritual disposition of the protagonist.

So richly allusive are the names that Tony Tanner in "Saul Bellow: The Flight from Monologue" suggested even a possible relationship between our hero and Maurice Herzog, who in June